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DIGITAL CULTURE: THE EVOLUTION OF THE CULTURAL SECTOR

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Abstract

Technology has been impacting all sectors widely across the economy, empowered by the new Information and Communication Technologies the Digital Culture will contribute to the disappearance of limitations in cultural production and consumption.

In this research, we aim to assess the impacts of digitization and Internet penetration in how culture is produced, consumed and distributed, focusing both the impacts in the ancient institutions and the newly popularized spaces of domestic culture.

Keywords:

Digital Culture

Content Producer

Public Creation

Cultural Policy

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1. Introduction

The concept of culture has been around for centuries, with its meaning evolving throughout time with the evolution of society and its values. However, no change has been so dramatic as the one empowered by the penetration of digital in the cultural sector. The advancement in Information and Communications Technologies impacted culture in all its fronts, the way we create cultural products, the way they are disseminated and communicated, and even the ownership and accessibility of these products (Lavender, 2010). There are now new formats, new modes of expression, as well as entirely new channels and mediums to reach the public, and even new tools that allow institutions and artists to target the consumers better.

With this degree of change and novelties, there was a revamp of what is considered culture nowadays, as well as increasing difficulty in defining the boundaries of what should be considered cultural content due to the vast diversity and high amounts of creations that each individual originates and disseminates through digital mediums.

Digital culture can be seen as something powerful and beneficial for society as a whole, but it also added complexity to determine what is, in fact, valuable or not, not only due to having more cultural products and content than ever but also due to the change in the power dynamics in the sector. Culture has been historically dominated by the higher classes (Mulcahy, 2006), and in a later stage by governments and their approach to cultural policy, that could fall under two purposes: cultural democratization, which focus on ensuring every single individual as equal access to the available cultural products, or cultural democracy, that focus on supporting the diversity in production and access of cultural content. The digitization of culture alters this power dynamic, since now everyone can produce and disseminate their content, and more easily create and reach the public.

With this study, we intend to understand the impact of the Information Age on the development of culture: it is products, spaces, mediums and ability to reach and create public. To be able to do it, we will start by presenting what culture is and some key concepts that allow us to understand its evolution through time better, identify the main problems existent in the sector and how can the digitization of culture contribute to new outcomes in the mitigation or solution of such problems, but also contrasting the cultural sector previous to the penetration of the digital age, with its current state.

1.1. Methodology

This project of direct research follows a qualitative approach, through a literature review of relevant publications on the area from institutions such as UNESCO, one of the key authorities in the culture at global level, the European Commission and the UK Arts Council, and a variety of selected authors and journals.

Through the analysis of the selected publications, we aim to have a view of how culture was ruled and conducted before the surge of the Internet and the digitization era, and how it evolved after, from the perspective of relevant sources in the area, and through the evaluation of the approach of the relevant political institutions.

2. Culture – Main Concepts

Culture is a word with a multitude of meanings and connotations, throughout this work, the concept of culture is considered as the activities and products that result from the moral, intellectual and artistic aspects of the cultivation of society and the individual (Throsby, 2001). This definition highlights the importance of the democratization of culture both in terms of production, as of access and participation, since it is a sector that can originate positive externalities to the entire society (Vilar, 2007). It is due to this broad impact and capability to

contribute to social cohesion and integration, through the creation of a cultural identity that should include everyone, that we decided to explore this topic and analyze how the development of Information and Communication Technologies has contributed to changes in the ability to have a more inclusive society in cultural terms.

Cultural Products

The classification as a cultural product requires the use of creativity in its creation, it needs to create or communicate symbolic meaning, and finally, it should be liable to intellectual property rights.¹ Until the decade of 50, culture and arts were commonly used as interchangeable terms, only with the industrialization of the world, a new concept surged in the Frankfurt School when cultural products started being mass-produced, named cultural industries by Adolfo and Horkheimer.

At this stage, culture had two types of products: the non-industrial, that englobes mainly the more traditional art products, and the industrial, characterized by the capability of mass-reproduction and distribution (Study of the Economy of Culture in Europe, 2006). This advancement already allowed a new level of spreading of culture, since a high cost of production characterizes it, but with a low cost of reproduction and distribution, therefore emphasizing the need for economies of scale and audience maximization (Garnham, 2005), in order to make the cultural industries viable.

Culture's Agents and Spaces

Culture is a sector that encompasses a diverse network of agents and spaces, with different statuses of acknowledgement and legitimacy, from the space of high culture and cultural industries, promoted mainly by the state and cultural enterprises, to the spaces of subcultures,

¹ See Throsby, 2001

and the domestic and collective space (Costa, 1997), involving mostly associations, informal and amateur groups.

The individual agent can establish several types of relationships with culture products and its spaces: the creator, involved in cultural production, the messenger, the one that communicates a message through cultural expression, and the participant and consumer, that can have different degrees of involvement, from a more active perspective, is the participant, and in a more passive approach, the individual can be the receptor of cultural messages to which he is exposed through the media in its daily life.

Creative Industries

Garnham (2005) presented the concept of Creative Industries as a consequence of the development of information and communication technologies that have put our society revolving around data and information, with access and variety of content and products becoming normalized. This change in paradigm, from cultural to creative industries is a refocus on the artist, on the capability of exerting creativity, that is what mainly differentiates the human being from the machines and algorithms that have proliferated in our day to day life. Not only should the artist leverage this valuable capability at present, as it will be demanded by the consumer to do so, due to the high perceptual value of having choices not only in terms of the product or services offering but also in terms of product design and user experience (Pratt, 2007).

High and Low Culture

This last concept is a discussion that accompanied culture across time. Due to the difficulty in assessing value in this sector, added to the uniqueness of the products and services, or the lack of uniformity in value assessment criteria, there is a joint discussion between what should be

considered or not culture that led to several dualities in the classification of cultural assets that difficultly will be solved due to the subjectivity of the factor of taste. To be able to classify culture in these terms, it means that someone or some institution is determining in favor of society what should be considered as culture.

Pratt (2007) provides us with the basics to understand the origin of this division: the high culture was the one that earlier days was supplied by the state, with low culture referring to the creations that came from the people, but nowadays this frontier is becoming increasingly blurred. This type of distinction is always specific to the cultural development at the epoch, specific to the geography and time, and always in evolution.

The human need to oppose and classify cultural production can take several shapes, but always with a frequent basis of dividing the good from the bad, either based on the provider (state or the people), the objective (entertainment and popular culture in opposition to the institutionalized culture) or the perceptual value and quality (good and bad). We enter a delicate discussion, where merit walks hands-on with form, and most of the discussion enters in a scope of personal tastes and aesthetic values (Fisher, 2005), where it is easy to lose the focus of the discussion, and end up opposing the high and low social classes, with elitism and the high arts trying to diminish populism, and it is cultural diversity and representativity.

Overview of the relationships and evolution of the main cultural concepts

The changes in consumer behavior and values, pointing towards a trend of eclecticism and variety in the genres, mediums and forms consumed², valuing creativity and creative workers, points to a change in the power dynamics of the cultural sector. Where previously the high-level institutions dictated the cultural production and consumption, much due to the need for

² See Colbert and Courchesne (2012)

state-sponsored cultural activity, we can now see the artist and the consumer taking the spotlight.

In an initial phase arts were mainly a result of patronage, and later due to the mass production of cultural products directed by the leading cultural enterprises and institutions, such as the over the top influence in cinematographic production exerted by Hollywood, right now the artist dictates what they want to produce, the message that they want to communicate and how they want to do it, while the consumer also demands to have their requirements and tastes satisfied.

To simplify the complexity of the cultural ecosystem, we present below a schematic overview of the relationships between the concepts explained previously, with each arrow representing the type and direction of the relationship.

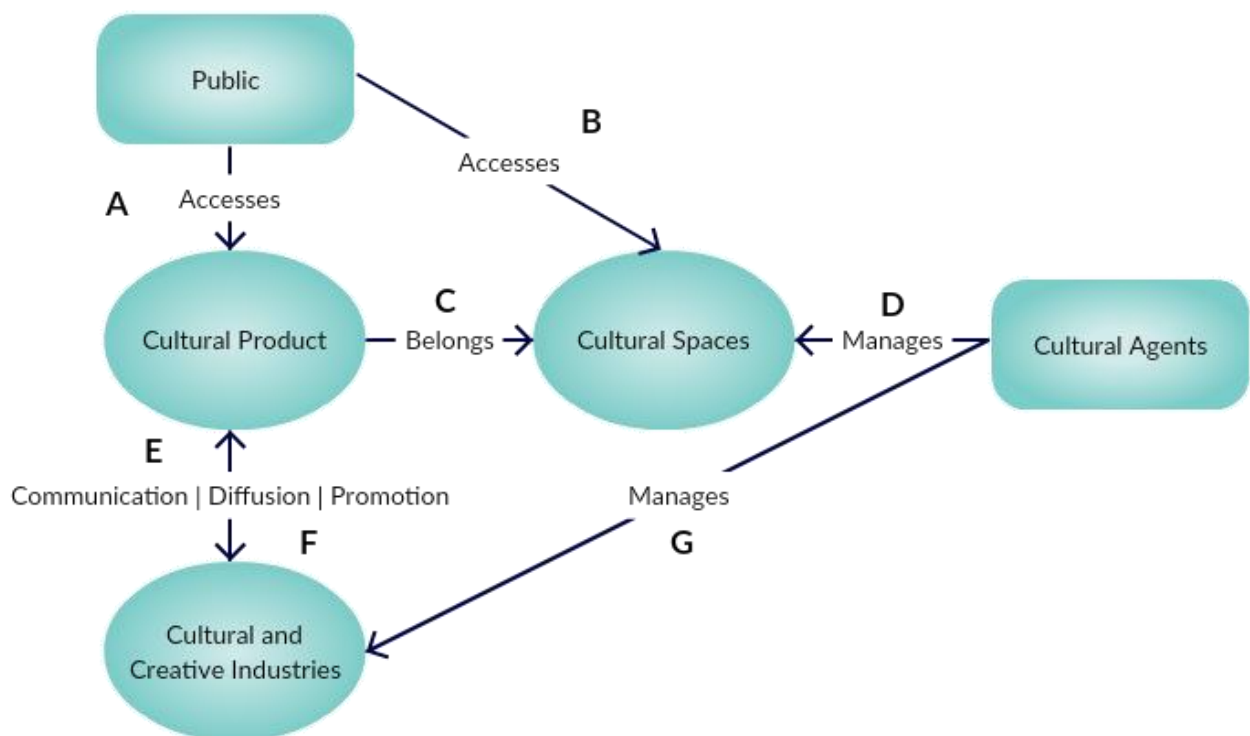


Figure 1 - Relationships between the key cultural concepts

In culture, we have two main types of agents, the ones that produce and manage culture, here represented by the cultural agents, and the ones that consume cultural content, represented by

the public. The existence of cultural consumption and participation, implies the existence of accessibility to the products and spaces, that has to be ensured by the creators and promoters and that are supported by the developments of the concepts of cultural and creative industries, that function as a new approach to the communication, diffusion and promotion of culture, empowered by technological advancements, initially the industrialization, and now the information era.

3. Problems and limitations in the cultural sector

With a broad understanding of the leading forces and agents shaping the sector, we will now focus on the main pain points for the agents in the network, and with this, comprehend which are the core areas to analyze in terms of the impact of the digitization of culture, focusing the effect it had in mitigating or solving them.

3.1. Consumer Perspective

From a consumer viewpoint, culture can present itself as inaccessible, and even when accessible, can present barriers to active participation and inclusive experience. Some groups are more prone to face this problem, mainly when we consider the work previous to the Internet and its proliferation in the life of individuals and institutions.

- Accessibility

According to Moore (1998), access is defined as the ability to have a choice in participating and enjoying cultural products and services, which is affected by factors of very diverse natures such as *“practical, physical, social and cultural”*.

Some individuals have a higher predisposition to be excluded from having adequate access to culture, such as the poor, either due to financial, time or travel constraints, people with

disabilities, since many times our world is still not prepared to serve their specific needs, this is either in terms of infrastructure or even in the forms and mediums used in cultural creation.

Culture, especially its older products and structures, is also characterized by being very restricted in geographical terms, creating a physical barrier in access, since due to its high value and uniqueness, most art pieces are fixed and presented exclusively in one cultural space, such as a museum, or national monument.

- Participation

Throughout time, culture and its institutions functioned in a dynamic relationship between social and political power, which reflects itself in today's conditions of cultural access and participation. When social classes become more powerful and relevant in the composition of society, they also become more demanding in terms of their representativity both on the side of cultural production as well as on access and participation (EU, 2015). This is key to comprehend the real difference between providing conditions of access and conditions to participate since to have active participation.

The consumer needs to be engaged to attend events or cultural infrastructures and to interact and absorb from the products and experience.

For the individual to be engaged it needs to have a certain degree of cultural capital, in Moore's assessment (1998) about inequality in participation and access to arts, the two core criteria were income and education level, and when certain minimum thresholds are not attained, there is a lack of identification with culture, due to lack of knowledge, but also due to the low level of prioritization or perceptual value of consuming culture. Furthermore, lower classes tend to suffer from a lack of familiarity with cultural discourse, venues and forms, increasing the

discomfort of the experience, even facing discrimination when trying to enter this scope of life in society.

3.2. Supply-side perspective

On the other side, regarding supply, either in terms of creators or intermediary cultural institutions, the main challenges present itself regarding the capability to reach the public and augment the size and diversity of their consumers. This is a multidimensional challenge since it encompasses the ability to communicate, promote and distribute cultural products and spaces, as well as to ensure that what they are presenting to their public is indeed according to their tastes and preferences, and in formats that will engage their participation.

- **Public Creation**

The task of public creation can be approached from three-axis: audience diversification, audience broadening and audience deepening³. The first corresponds to a strategy of economies of scale, trying to reach the broader amount of public possible, the second corresponds to audience maximization, this is, guaranteeing that from the current public we are getting to the highest number of individuals possible. Finally, audience deepening corresponds to a strategy of higher engagement with the current public, reinforcing the relationship with them.

We can observe some overlaps with the problematics from the consumer perspective, while the consumers struggle to have access and capability of participating, the institutions and content creators struggle to be able to provide the necessary conditions to reach the public.

³ See Bakhshi & Throsby, 2012

The approach of audience maximization is emphasized by the approach of democratization of culture, where governments act as the supply side (Evrard, 1997), where the government controls what is promoted and distributed but, on the upside, tries to ensure that everyone has access to it. Nowadays, the trend is more in the direction of a cultural democracy, where the government does not influence the production but ensures that representativity is transversal in cultural production, encouraging the enlargement of cultural expression to the whole society.

While we should push for a society with equal access to all cultural products and spaces, there should also be a focus on the needs and tastes of each individual, that is so predominant in such sector. It is not realistic to assume that everyone will want to participate and consume the same types of content, forms and genres. However, it is fundamental to ensure that when an individual wants to participate in cultural life, that he can find something that he identifies himself with, in an accessible form.

- Promotion and Communication

This is a problem transversal to any business, to ensure that they can get the word about their product to their target public in an informative and timely manner and distribute both the promotion actions and the product itself through the most appropriate channels. It englobes the advertisement, events and achieving large scale reproduction. This area already suffered valuable upgrades with the industrialization era, since the high availability of content that could be mass replicated and distributed came to bring a new level of audience reach, also due to having cultural products achieving the lowest costs possible until that time.

This area is crucial to support and leverage the previous topic of public creation, a poor or poorly executed promotion and communication strategy can lead to the failure of a cultural space or product, even if it fits the public tastes and demands.

4. The impact of the Digital Era

In this section, we will start by analyzing the current state of the cultural sector, regarding the concepts we exposed in section “2. Culture – Main Concepts”, to understand how cultural economics and policy has been evolving due to the influence of the digital era, together with consumer behavior, and the profile of the content creator. In a second stage, we will try to evaluate the impact of these changes and influences in the list of problems identified in section “3. Problems and limitations in the cultural sector”. This analysis will be made through the comparison of the previous literature review, with factual and current cases of cultural institutions that represent the implementation of good digital practices.

4.1. Overview of the current cultural sector

Nowadays, technology is at the centre of our lives, from a series of devices, such as the computer and the smartphone, that allows us to have access to the biggest depository of information through the Internet, anywhere, anytime, to all the services and platforms that exist only in the digital space. Several of them came to transform the way we live our everyday. The social media, for example, created an entirely new space of interaction between individuals, but also for organizations and companies that now had a new and direct way to target their consumers. The new capabilities of processing, managing, storing and sharing data and

information have been altering and affecting all the sectors of the economy and our lives, and as such culture is not different (Lavender, 2010).

One of the most undiscussable facts about technology is that it altered profoundly the way individuals communicate⁴. This facilitated access to information and communications has put any individual capable of having three different roles in the cultural sector: new public, due to unprecedented easiness of access to a previously unseen amount of content, content creator and curator, and as critics, with the current possibility of constant and immediate feedback loops (Lavender, 2010).

The establishment of platforms where everyone can post their content, and anyone can easily access it, has led to a profound alteration in the amount, genres and variety of content available in the world, culture now also includes media artefacts. This means that we are the further we have been from the elitist view of culture, since virtually anyone can be a creator and have a space to expose and distribute its content (Schäfer, 2011), giving a new spotlight to the previously unseen domestic and collective spaces, due to low costs of production (amateur level) that can be distributed at zero cost, and if successful can be monetized.

The change in distribution channels also led to the surge of new formats of content. Video proliferates nowadays, in different formats and approaches, and predominates in the domestic and collective space, but even in the space of high culture and cultural industries there has been a change in the forms presented, with more interactive products, using new technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR), and full-on digital artworks.

⁴ See Lavender, 2010

The creative industries are becomingly increasingly relevant, and there has been a trend of a policy shift from the cultural to the creative industries (Garnham, 2005), with countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) changing the focus from the supply of the cultural market to the artist itself, and in promoting the conditions for a representative supply of culture. Nevertheless, it also came to broaden the concept of culture, UNESCO included “*Design and Creative Services*”⁵ as one of the cultural domains, which has fields such as Fashion and Graphic Design, as well as architectural and advertising services.

The broadening of concepts and the increasing diversity of content and its representativity, has led to a change in the patterns of cultural consumption, following a trend of eclecticism, with more openness and tolerance. Currently, people tend to have more diverse patterns of consumption, both in genre and form, which has led to a decrease in the consumption of high culture transversal to all classes of society (Ollivier *et al.*, 2009), and therefore a decrease in the influence of established cultural institutions.

The digitization of culture is contributing to the development of cultural democracy, with governments tending to interfere less in the supply side, and artists posing at the center of the stage, bringing with them representativity in terms of genres, forms, and most importantly at the social level. From the consumer side, the offer is the largest and most diverse ever and is increasingly available through the devices that accompany us every day.

4.2. The contribution to the problems in the cultural sector

⁵ See “The 2009 UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics (FCS)—UNESCO Digital Library”, 2009

The development of the digitization of culture has contributed to advances that led to the mitigation of the problems we previously identified. We can observe a trend of improvement that has challenges to overcome in order to be able actually to solve them. Nevertheless, the fact is that we are currently in the best conditions to start tackling them.

Consumer Perspective

- Accessibility

We have already referred the impact of the changes in the distribution channels of the domestic and collective cultural content, that is freely available to anyone that has a device with an internet connection through well know platforms of content sharing and social networks, such as Youtube, Soundcloud or even Instagram.

Regarding the more traditional field of the arts and cultural institutions, the change has also been very evident. The primary phase of digitization in culture comprehends the placement of the physical, cultural assets in the digital world, therefore decreasing economic and geographical barriers to cultural access (European Union, 2017). The advancement in visualization and streaming technology also allows the live reproduction of events, exhibits and shows, enlarging the level of the experience, and allowing a different level of distribution of live performances without the loss of the value of the cultural product⁶.

- Participation

⁶ See Bakhshi and Throsby, 2012 – The Tate Museum and The National Theatre experiments

The new levels of access to culture and its diversity also lead to increased participation. Several physical, social and emotional barriers can suddenly disappear when the experience is in a virtual setting.

Furthermore, the direct connection to the public also allows institutions and artists to have a more hands-on approach in the education of its publics, through content strategies in blogs or social networks, or through the creation of new types of experiences that allow people with lower levels of cultural capital to relate the cultural content, either through a tweak in form or medium of communication or distribution.

Supply Side Perspective

- **Public Creation**

The digitization of culture facilitates the creation of publics through any of its three-axis, it is easier to target new people, through online ads, the broadening of the public is also facilitated by online ads and the possibility of having an online presence and create a digital community that tend to attract consumers similar to the ones already in the network. The deepening of the public is almost a loop challenging to get out nowadays, due to online targeting through ads and difficulty in excluding the current consumers from receiving the same communication, since they are targeted through profiling of interests.

The institutions and artists now have easy access to the consumer and its feedback, allowing the iteration in the direction of the consumer needs and wants.

- **Promotion and Communication**

The placement of communications to ensure a higher likelihood of getting to the target audience is a crucial competency nowadays. Digital marketing is core for any institution, company or

individual artist that is trying to be heard and seen in the market. It is the tool that allows targeting by demographics and relevant interests and tastes.

More than creating a new way to reach the message to the audience, the digitization of culture promoted the creation and proliferation of new distribution channels.

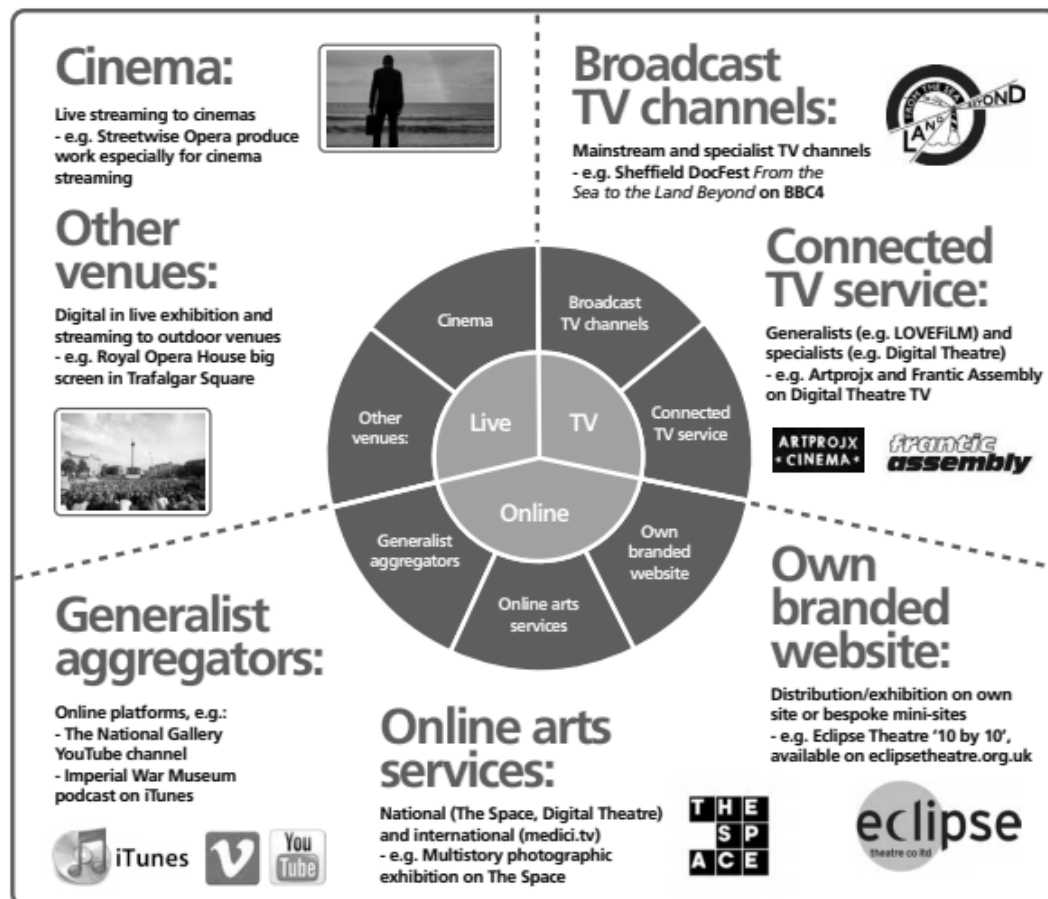


Figure 2 - Online Distribution Channels (Digital Culture: How arts and cultural organisations in England use technology, 2013)

These channels target both new formats that were also made available with digitization, but they also provide new platforms for older products. In Figure 2, we have a schematic representation of the online distribution channels identified by the UK Arts Council in their initial assessment of the cultural sector in 2013.

Divided into three main categories Live, Tv and Online, we can have a better understanding of how they are impacting the transmission of current cultural events. It is interesting to note that in this case, the idea is to highlight the alternative solutions they are providing, and that is why we have the reference to cinema, as a medium to live streaming of an opera. To retain the value of the cultural asset, there is also a need to ensure the quality of the new medium, we could also have the same opera on Youtube, referred as an online generalist aggregator, but the experience would not be comparable to the cinema.

With these new tools, any institution can modernize itself, and be closer to their audience, creating a relationship through time, instead a one time only, physical and offline experience. It should also be noted that these means can be used to overcome the difficulties that individuals with disabilities face, either in an online or offline experience.

Challenges

We identified two main challenges that the cultural sector will face in terms of digitization: the first and more relevant one is in terms of skills, as identified by the UK government in 2019. To take advantage of digital technologies, it will be necessary to focus on the reskilling or reshaping the teams of cultural organizations. However, once these skills are integrated, the potential and amount of value that can be extracted from them are enormous.

The second challenge is not a challenge for the cultural sector, but another divide in our society that is creating a different type of inequality in access, a limitation that the world is still unable to surpass: the lack of accessibility to the technology itself. Despite the Internet, computers, mobile phones, between many others, being taken as guaranteed for the majority of the population of developed countries, it is not a global reality.

Using Internet access as a proxy for technological access, since most technological developments nowadays rely on it, it was observed an average worldwide rate of access of 48%, with 41.3% for developing countries and 81% for developed countries (Statista). By observing the behavior of the same variable across the US, it is also relevant to mention the existence of inequalities between the different levels of academic achievements, only 65% of individuals with less than high school have internet access, compared to 84% of individuals with a high school degree and 93% regarding people with higher degrees (Statista). Even in the developed countries, technology access faces limitations due to inequalities in income, academic degree and age group, and without achieving the democratization of technology access, the democratization of culture will continue to be a utopia.

5. Conclusion

The main objectives for this work were attained, through the literature review analysis that allowed us to establish a comparison between the forces that shaped culture before and after the Digital era, and how they are already impacting the problems that culture has been facing for centuries.

The potential of technology in the cultural sector is still far from being achieved, with countries as the UK leading the race. To accelerate this process, we need more action on the political side, both in new policies and guidelines and in investment. The European Union has also made consistent efforts in this way. However, the majority of countries forget culture in terms of digital transformation.

5.1. Limitations and suggestions for future works

To complement this qualitative analysis, in a future work a second moment of data collection should be introduced, with primary data from industry experts, people from the political and cultural sector, that would also allow us to have an insight on how they envision the future and evolution of culture.

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